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SUBJECT: CHIEFS OF MISSION DISCUSS PRISONER LISTS, RELIGIOUS/MEDIA FREEDOM, AND AUSTRALIA'S HR DIALOGUE

Ref: Hanoi 662

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. Participants at the Ambassador's August 21 luncheon of "like-minded" chiefs of mission agreed that the MFA has lately been more responsive in providing information about prisoners. Guests also concurred with the Ambassador's assessment of religious freedom in the Northwest, noting that while conditions vary considerably, more could be done to help local officials better understand the issues. Several expressed concern that whatever the fate of the two journalists arrested in the wake of the PMU-18 corruption scandal, the main effect would be to discourage aggressive reporting. Australia's representative previewed her country's upcoming human rights dialogue, highlighting plans to host a study tour. The Ambassador urged those present to press Vietnam to join the Hague Convention on international adoptions. END SUMMARY.

PRISONER LISTS AND AMNESTY

¶2. (SBU) On August 21, the Ambassador hosted chiefs of mission of Western embassies to discuss recent developments in Vietnam's human rights situation. With less than two weeks remaining before the GVN's anticipated September 2 National Day amnesty, discussion focused first on prisoner lists and expected releases. EU Ambassador Sean Doyle summarized a general sense that while many of the MFA's responses to requests for information on individual prisoners on the EU's list remained "stereotyped and repetitive," others were more informative, and that overall the Ministry was becoming increasingly receptive though the group remained skeptical that this would lead to more prisoners of concern receiving amnesty. With overlapping lists from the EU, individual countries such as the United States and Australia, and collectives such as the "Group of Four" (Canada, New Zealand, Norway, and Switzerland) -- some asking for prisoner release, others simply requesting information -- the group agreed to work to coordinate lists and share information on the GVN's response(s). All agreed on the need to regularly raise individual cases of concern with the GVN.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN THE NORTHWEST

¶3. (SBU) The Ambassador noted that conditions for religious freedom in the Northwest differ considerably from province to province. During a recent trip, for example, Embassy officers encountered a much more positive attitude toward religious groups among local officials in Dien Bien than in Son La (reftel). Given this inconsistency -- and the frequent discrepancy between central-level directives and how those directives are carried out -- the luncheon's participants agreed that more could be done to reach out to local officials in the provinces. Canada's CDA Robert Burley said that the G4 had found a similar range of attitudes and capacities in its regional visits and cited efforts to work with the Woman's Union in Dien Bien on issues touching on religious freedom. German Ambassador Rolf Schulze struck a somewhat discordant note,

pointing to media coverage of a confrontation between Catholic demonstrators and police in a Hanoi land dispute (septel) as evidence of a possible crackdown.

PMU-18 AND MEDIA FREEDOM

14. (SBU) Several participants expressed apprehension that whatever the plot twists in the Public Management Unit 18 (PMU-18) corruption scandal, the immediate impact of the journalists' arrest will be to inhibit reporting on sensitive topics such as corruption. UK Ambassador Mark Kent and Norway's CDA Ann-Helen Azedo referred to draft revisions to Vietnam's press law as a mixed blessing, arguing that language calling for the Party to strengthen its role in the media would dilute some of the more positive provisions providing for greater protection of sources and access to government information (septel). [Note: The revisions are expected to go to the National Assembly for approval in October. In the meantime, the old press law remains in effect.]

AUSTRALIA'S HUMAN RIGHTS DIALOGUE

15. (SBU) Australian DCM Venessa Wood previewed what Australia expects will be a "robust dialogue" on the standard range of human rights issues beginning August 26. After the meeting, the GOA is sponsoring a study tour for the delegation and a representative from Vietnam's National Assembly, meeting with parliamentary subcommittees and Australia's Human Rights Ombudsman.

ADOPTIONS

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16. (SBU) The Ambassador urged the participants to back U.S. efforts to press Vietnam to join the Hague Convention on International Adoptions. He noted that GVN attitudes toward the issue of baby selling had improved, moving from outright denial to more frank discussion. Recent arrests of individuals allegedly involved in child trafficking have also been a positive sign. The EU and Australian representatives voiced broad support. Ambassador Doyle said that EU legal counsel will discuss the matter and suggested that the eventual EU consensus position will support the U.S. stance. Australian DCM Wood said that in its discussions on adoptions, Australia had also pressed the GVN to join the Hague Convention.

17. (U) Participants:

U.S. Embassy
Ambassador Michalak
DCM Virginia Palmer
Poloff (notes)

Others

Australia - DCM Ms. Vanessa Wood
Canada - CDA Mr. Robert Burley
Denmark - CDA Ms. Tove Degnbol
EU - Ambassador Sean Doyle
Germany - Ambassador Rolf Schulze
Netherlands - Ambassador Andre Haspels
New Zealand - Ambassador James Kember
Norway - CDA Ms. Ann-Helen Azedo
Switzerland - CDA Ms. Tanja Zanger
Sweden - CDA Marie-Louise Thaning
UK - Ambassador Mark Kent

MICHALAK